

Traffic Safety News & Facts For Employers

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- ☛ Top automotive executives have decided to hire a high-profile person to represent automakers in the nation's capital and in statehouses. The 10 companies that form the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers are about to begin a search for a CEO, to be the industry's top public advocate, officials say. The planned changes undo some of the alliance's founding principles. Besides bringing the Big 3 and import-brand automakers together in one association, the alliance was designed to be exceptionally lean and efficient. Its founders said it would cooperate with government on safety and environmental issues. Automakers have been on the defensive about the safety of their most profitable vehicles, light trucks. They are facing the first hikes in fuel economy standards in a decade. Some states, led by California, want to limit greenhouse gas emissions from vehicles. Federal regulators are in the midst of the most sweeping overhaul of safety rules in a generation. And big congressional debates are expected on tax, energy and health care issues.
- ☛ In the aftermath of September 11, many companies have revised their crisis communications plans to increase their abilities to reach employees who are traveling on business. The measures companies are taking include providing cell phones that can run on networks globally and subscribing to services such as iJet Travel Intelligence that can send travelers up-to-the-minute alerts about their destinations via e-mail, cell phone, PDA, pager or the Internet.
- ☛ Distractions like talking to passengers and eating and their role in car crashes will be examined in an NSW government-funded study. The \$107,000 study, to be conducted by the University of New South Wales (NSW) and the University of Western Australia and funded by the Motor Accidents Authority, will examine the role of driver distraction in car accidents. "The effect of drunk driving, speed and fatigue in road crashes is well documented," Special Minister of State John della Bosca said. "There is now a need for research into other causes of road

crashes, particularly driver distraction. "Potential distractions include talking to passengers, eating, adjusting controls, music and mobile phone use." External factors such as other drivers would also be examined, he said. Researchers will study the causes of serious car crashes and will interview victims to see whether specific distractions played a role in their crash. Mr. Della Bosca said a telephone survey of drivers aged between 18 and 65 would also be conducted in NSW and in Western Australia to examine driver attitude and behavior when distractions are present, and whether the distractions resulted in near misses or crashes.

- In a study of crashes caused by distracted driving, the California Highway Patrol (CHP) found that cell phones were factors in 0.1 percent of crashes overall. The study analyzed 481,083 crashes, of which 5,677 were attributed to distracted driving. Of the crashes caused by driver inattention, 11 percent involved cell phones; nine percent involved the radio or a CD player; four percent involved distracting children; three percent, eating; and two percent, reading. The remainder of the crashes was attributed to forms of personal hygiene such as hair combing; disoriented pets; and smoking. The overwhelming causes of all crashes were first, driving under the influence, and second, driving too fast for conditions. The CHP study did not recommend bans on cell phone use by drivers, pointing out that radios and CD players were involved in nearly as many crashes. Similar studies in Montana, Minnesota and Oklahoma also found cell phone use factors in less than one percent of crashes. Critics say that such studies are flawed because drivers could be hesitant to admit that they were on the phone when a crash occurred. California Assemblyman Joe Simitian (D-Palo Alto), who supports legislation restricting drivers' use of hand-held cell phones, said the CHP study adds to a "growing mountain of evidence" about the dangers of cell phone use while driving.
- Many of today's crashes are caused by drivers' lack of attention, for whatever reason, causing them to leave their lane of travel and often

leaving them unable to regain control. During the SAE 2003 World Congress, March 3 to 6, 2003, in Detroit, Volvo will unveil a Lane Departure Module. The system consists of a camera with image processing software that detects current lane position by measuring distances from the camera centerline to the left and right lane markings. If a driver mismanages steering control and wavers from the lane, the torque of the steering wheel helps guide the driver back to the appropriate steering angle required to come back in the lane. "Results from test drives indicate that, despite its simplicity, the system is fully sufficient for helping drivers stay in the lane without being perceived as being on autopilot," says Jochen Pohl, Volvo Car Corporation and an author of the SAE technical paper. A common existing approach to mediating lane departure today is the use of "rumble strips" - intentional pavement irregularities that alert the driver with noise and vibration when the vehicle leaves its lane. But by their placement, rumble strips work after the vehicle has departed the lane. In many situations, this kind of warning comes too late. The Volvo system is designed to give the driver time to regain control of the vehicle before an accident occurs.

- Acting Pennsylvania State Transportation Secretary, Allen D. Biehler announced that starting on February 21, 2003, motorists must turn their vehicles' headlights on when traveling through a work zone to comply with state law. "This is yet another proactive step that the Commonwealth is taking to help curtail the senseless deaths that occur in work zones," Biehler said. According to Biehler, PENNDOT is in the process of supplying all its county maintenance forces with new signs that will be used at the start of most work zones to remind motorists to turn their headlights on. Additionally, PENNDOT says that municipalities and utility companies will use the new signs on many of their larger projects, particularly on high-speed roads. According to PENNDOT, the law is a secondary offense and punishable by a fine of \$25 when signs are in place.
- The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) is inviting comments concerning the need for and potential benefits and costs of implementing a graduated commercial driver's license (GCDL) for

commercial motor vehicle (CMV) drivers. A graduated driver's license is a system designed to ease beginning drivers into the traffic environment under controlled exposure to progressively more difficult driving experiences. A graduated or provisional licensing system helps novice drivers improve their driving skills and helps them acquire on-the-road experience under less risky conditions by progressing, or graduating, through driver licensing stages before unrestricted licensure. FMCSA wants to determine if this concept can be successfully adapted to novice CMV drivers.

- Dr. Jeffrey Runge, who heads the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, said last week that he would let automakers voluntarily improve the safety of SUVs but left open the option of forcing them to make changes if necessary. He told a congressional hearing that the industry can move more swiftly than government on safety improvements. Runge told the Senate Commerce Committee, "We will be moving in parallel directions and we will be watching them closely. Hopefully it can be done without huge regulation." Declaring he would not let members of his family drive some SUV models, Runge nevertheless said some SUVs are as safe as cars. He did not say which ones were off limits in his family. There are 22 million SUVs on U.S. roads, about 10 percent of the total number of vehicles. America's fascination with SUVs, which began in the early 1990s, has cooled in the past three years with flat sales and the emergence of smaller, more carlike SUVs, often referred to as crossover vehicles. The industry has recently acknowledged SUV safety concerns as federal regulators and Congress have sharpened their focus on the issue. The Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers said auto companies agree with government figures showing the fatality rate in rollovers is three times greater for those in SUVs than for those in cars.
- A new report recommends giving commuters the option of a congestion-free trip by transforming existing carpool lanes into a network of toll lanes that would guarantee drivers and buses at least one lane moving at the maximum speed limit, at all times, on most urban freeways. Buses and high capacity vans would use the lanes free of charge, while individual motorists would pay a variable toll. Tolls would be debited electronically from smart cards placed on a car's dashboard, thus doing away with

road-wise workforce



tollbooths and cash transactions. The number of vehicles in the managed lanes would be controlled through variable pricing, ensuring the lanes are free-flowing at all times and providing local transportation agencies with a significant source of income for construction and maintenance projects. In Los Angeles, for example, toll revenues would exceed \$900 million per year. In Washington, D.C., and San Francisco, toll revenues would surpass \$400 million per year. The study concludes the projected toll revenues would enable tax-exempt toll revenue bonds to cover two-thirds of the costs of adding the new lanes and interchanges that would be necessary to create a seamless network of high-occupancy toll lanes in most cities. The rest of the funding would come from traditional federal and state transportation programs.